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AUTHOR Davies, Don
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ABSTRACT

There are many different forms of community involvement and citizen participation in the schools. But while the quantity is high, the quality and impact are lagging far behind. The author (who is president of the Institute for Responsive Education) advocates the reintroduction of democratic values into education. Through school-based management, many important aspects of decision-making can be decentralized to the school building level. Workable decentralization requires a sensible plan of checks and balances, and citizens councils can encourage its development. Currently, however, citizens councils seem ineffective, partly because they have been given little authority or assistance by school officials. The author also advocates community access to collective bargaining in the schools and educational program diversity to serve different interests in the community. (Author/DS)

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CITIZEN PARTICIPATION: QUALITY AND IMPACT

by Don Davies, President
Institute for Responsive Education

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Institute for Responsive Education
704 Commonwealth Avenue
Boston, Massachusetts 02215

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Citizen participation exists in hundreds of American communities in a dazzling array of forms. But there is a Grand Canyon between the rhetoric and the reality. The quantity is high; quality and impact are lagging far behind.

Educators and noneducators support the general principle of participation. It's not easy to argue against motherhood and apple pie, democracy and citizenship. It's when we start trying to translate the rhetoric into workable programs and structures that we face a stone wall of professional resistance. School boards are reluctant to dilute their authority or enter into extensive exchanges of resources with other community agencies and groups. Citizen groups themselves are often divided and uncertain. They seldom find the internal support they need to sustain change efforts, much less support from schools.

We're probably more familiar with political forms of citizen involvement than nonpolitical forms. But there are important nonpolitical forms of participation which build bridges between the school and the diverse community in which it sits. Nonpolitical forms attract many people who prefer to avoid controversy. Activities which seem unrelated to power and control issues are good starting points for schools and communities to begin to talk with one another, tap new resources, and develop the motivation and skill needed for continuing collaboration.

Many professionals view nonpolitical citizen participation activities (like using community resources to enhance school program, volunteer porgrams, tutoring, and mutual fact-finding projects) as cake frosting, somehow tangential to the primary task of the school. These views overlook the demonstrated potential of these activities for redefining the objectives of education; moving beyond a classroom and textbook-bound concept of schooling; and finding a good marriage between theory

and practice, learning and doing.

School initiated programs for participation are often windowdressing -- a new form of public relations with no design toward shared decision making or collaboration. The public will catch on quickly to manipulation and deceit; whatever trust that may have existed will be destroyed. The result will be increased cynicism, apathy, and alienation. Better to have honest professional and centralized control than a phony show of participation and democracy.

THE INSTITUTE FOR RESPONSIVE EDUCATION

The Institute for Responsive Education is a Boston-based, national, non-profit organization looking for ways to increase the citizen voice in school decision making. Through our work on projects related to participation, school councils, and collective bargaining across the nation, we have developed some goals for increasing both the quality and quanity of citizen participation:

MORE DEMOCRACY

Without an ideology, participation is head-less and soul-less. The goal must be more self-government for people in their own schools and communities. People affected by decisions of institutions and government agencies should have a voice in making those decisions.

Schools are good proving grounds for efforts to combine the participatory and electoral strands of popular democracy. They are the largest and most costly public service enterprise. They directly touch the lives of a large portion of the public. They offer a dual opportunity to provide a living demonstration of institutional democracy through citizen participation, and to educate young people for activist, participatory citizenship.

SCHOOL-BASED MANAGEMENT AND SCHOOL COUNCILS

If democratic governance of schools is to be a reality, many important aspects of decision making must be decentralized to the school building level. School-based management requires transferring important decision-making powers from the central school board and the central school administrative office to individual schools. Many larger districts have already adopted some form of administrative decentralization to subdistricts. A few districts, notably in California and Florida, are testing the idea of the school site as the point of decision making.

There is nothing mysterious or radical about making as many decisions as possible close to home -- close to children, classrooms, teachers, neighborhood school buildings, and the community. These decisions should include selecting and evaluating building administrators, teachers, and other staff; setting budget priorities; and making curriculum and program decisions.

Workable decentralization requires a sensible plan of checks and balances. The plan should deal with the roles and responsibilities of individual school subdistricts, the school district, the state, and the federal government; balanced with roles of students, parents, teachers, citizens, administrators, employee organizations, and school boards.

The school council is the best mechanism for a permanent, legally recognized vehicle for orderly and continuing citizen participation. The interests of parents are most easily mobilized and sustained around the policies and practices of the schools their children attend.

I.R.E. studies indicate that at least 10,000 such building level councils now exist in all parts of the country, nearly all of them created in the last six years. The same studies show that most of these groups are feeble and have been given little authority or help by school officials. Yet there are also good examples of exciting, active school councils. The most effective councils usually

have the authority to: 1) assess community and student needs and identify facility needs; 2) identify goals and priorities for the school; 3)set school budget priorities; 4) improve community support for the school; investigate student or parent complaints or problems; and mobilize school and community response to special problems or crises; 5) select (or participate in the selection of) the principal and evaluate the principal; 6) participate in teacher and staff selection and evaluation; 7) review and approve new school programs, curricula, and student activities; 8) evaluate extracurricular activities; 9) coordinate volunteer programs and other programs to provide parent/community assistance to the school; and 10) communicate school problems and needs to area or district councils and the school committee.

In schools where Title I Parent Advisory Committees or other federally mandated groups exist, and where there are active PTAs or other parent organizations, a school council should be an umbrella group. It should build on the leadership and experience of existing groups and perform parallel, non-competitive functions. Councils should also represent all the various groups within the school community -- teachers, students, other school staff, administrators, parents, and other community residents.

COLLABORATION

Collaboration means more than dividing up power and responsibility. It means sharing, a give-and-take process among school people and citizens, a creative dialogue and debate, and hopefully growth and learning by everybody involved. It means learning that power does not need to be a "zero sum game," that if parents "win" better schools, nobody loses.

This may sound naive and idealistic to many readers, yet we know many schools where such an approach works in a practical way to everybody's benefit.

(Two recent books which provide good examples of how collaboration works are Charlotte Ryan's The Open Partnership, and Schools Where Parents Make A Difference, by the Institute for Responsive Education.)

Conflicts, politics, and personal clashes are inevitable. Confrontation is sometimes necessary. But collaboration means harnessing professional talent and expertise to the needs of students, parents, and the community.

DIVERSITY AND CHOICE

Decentralization of decision making and a strong school council at the building level will produce a diversity of school programs. Welcome such diversity! It provides a greater choice for parents, students, and education professionals.

Schools of choice have been effective in Minneapolis; Quincy, Illinois; and Alum Rock, California. This kind of diversity within a school district provides opportunities for parents to influence educational policymaking and to have an important voice in choosing the kind of education best suited for their children.

COMMUNITY ACCESS TO COLLECTIVE BARGAINING

Collective bargaining, as it presently operates in more than 4000 school districts, is a major barrier to the achievement of most of the goals called for in this article. The private sector trade union model is a secret, bilateral, adversarial process that excludes parents, students, and other citizens from reasonable access or influence. Even School Board members, administrators, and teachers are locked out of the process in the increasing number of districts where the primary responsibility has been delegated to professional negotiators hired by both the employer and employee sides.

Several modifications to the present system are being looked at by I.R.E. and others. One alteration, now operating in California under a "sunshine" provision in the Rodda Act, is community access to the bargaining agenda in advance

of negotiations. In Florida and a few other towns scattered across the country, bargaining sessions are open to the public. Another possibility is multilevel bargaining where a district-wide contract is supplemented by school-by-school negotiations. Some have proposed multiparty bargaining, where representatives of PTSAs or school councils actually sit at the bargaining table.

But without any structural changes, any school board can communicate with its diverse constituency and be more responsive to the priorities and concerns of those affected by collective bargaining decisions, especially students and their parents. A more responsive board, in any system, using any collaborative method, can build better support for the results of the bargaining process.

There are many other goals toward which we'd like to see more effort directed. Citizens need good information in order to make good decisions about schools. They need access to information which is presently either hoarded or poorly organized. State and federal leaders need to encourage more and better participation in school affairs. Federal laws which require various forms of participation should also provide funds for training and technical assistance so that the participation process can be effective, not just another exercise in frustration. And school people need to recognize the necessity and advantages of working toward bringing citizens into the decision making process. Teacher organizations might seek ways to rebuild the natural alliance between parents and teachers.

But rather than a national strategy, or a federal program, or a regional effort, we need many small-scale, local efforts built on principles of democratic participation and action. We need to learn to think small, and to think first about healthy, self-governing communitites served by responsive and diverse schools. These are the best growing places for everybody.

For more information about I.R.E. or about any or all of our projects and publications, write to us at 704 Commonwealth Avenue, Boston, MA 02215.